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ABSTRACT

The increased demand on educational administrators to share power with parents, community groups, teachers, and school staff emphasizes the need for more participative decision-making and for improved communications with school groups and the outside public. Participative decision-making through groups or councils requires clear, unambiguous arrangements, support from the chief administrator, and a commitment to real power-sharing. The author provides guidelines for effective group procedures, for meeting group members' needs for inclusion, control, and affection, and for deciding the principal's role in the group. Communicating effectively with teachers and school staff requires that administrators understand the communication process, remain accessible, and develop skills in paraphrasing, describing behaviors and feelings, checking perceptions, and requesting feedback. A short selection of exercises for improving communication skills is included. For effective communication with the public, administrators need to develop public relations strategies that include personal contact, both formal and informal, with parents and with opinion leaders and other key communicators. Advisory groups and public surveys are among suggested methods for improved communication. Administrators also need good media relations to facilitate communication with many people in a short time. (Author/RW)

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Series 1, No. 21

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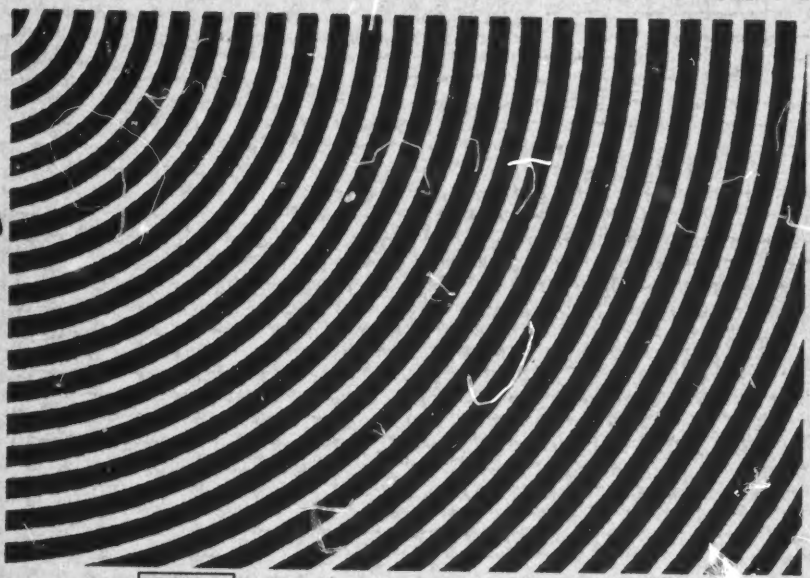
COMMUNICATIONS IN THE OPEN ORGANIZATION



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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management

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David Coursen

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About ERIC

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system operated by the National Institute of Education. ERIC serves the educational community by disseminating educational research results and other resource information that can be used in developing more effective educational programs.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, one of several clearinghouses in the system, was established at the University of Oregon in 1966. The Clearinghouse and its companion units process research reports and journal articles for announcement in ERIC's index and abstract bulletins.

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Journal articles are announced in *Current Index to Journals in Education*. *CIJE* is also available in many libraries and can be ordered for $85 a year from Oryx Press, 2214 North Central Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona 85004. Semiannual cumulations can be ordered separately.

Besides processing documents and journal articles, the Clearinghouse has another major function—information analysis and synthesis. The Clearinghouse prepares bibliographies, literature reviews, state-of-the-knowledge papers, and other interpretive research studies on topics in its educational area.

FOREWORD

Both the Association of California School Administrators and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management are pleased to cooperate in producing the *School Management Digest*, a series of reports designed to offer educational leaders essential information on a wide range of critical concerns in education.

At a time when decisions in education must be made on the basis of increasingly complex information, the *Digest* provides school administrators with concise, readable analyses of the most important trends in schools today, as well as points up the practical implications of major research findings.

By special cooperative arrangement, the series draws on the extensive research facilities and expertise of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. The titles in the series were planned and developed cooperatively by both organizations. Utilizing the resources of the ERIC network, the Clearinghouse is responsible for researching the topics and preparing the copy for publication by the Foundation for Educational Administration.

The author of this report, David Coursen, was commissioned by the Clearinghouse as a research analyst and writer.

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INTRODUCTION

Good communication has always been an important part of effective school leadership. Whether they've been outlining the rules to children in a one-room school or explaining innovative teaching methods to parents, educators have always needed to be good communicators. Until recently, most communication has moved in one direction; schools established their policies and then communicated them to students, parents, and other concerned groups.

In recent years, some fundamental changes have taken place in the way educational decisions are made. Communication no longer runs in one direction—from the administrator to the rest of the school community—nor does it occur only after decisions have been made. Today it is not enough for administrators simply to explain policies to parents or teachers; increasingly, by custom and by law, various groups are seeking more direct roles in the making of school policies.

At the school site level, parents, other citizens, teachers, and even students may seek a voice in decision-making. Administrators must respond by learning to listen as well as to speak, and by allowing these groups appropriate formats for participation in school decision-making.

For a variety of reasons people are demanding an increased voice in decision-making. To begin with, democratic ideals require that citizens have a say in decisions affecting their lives. Particularly for parents, the running of the schools, which play such a large role in all aspects of a child's development, is a matter of vital importance. Nonparents, too, have a stake in the quality of public education since, as taxpayers, they help pay for the schools. Taxation without representation has never been well regarded by Americans. The desire to make the schools accountable for their use of tax dollars has been another factor leading the public to demand a greater role in how the schools are run.

In addition, Americans have become increasingly skeptical of "experts," professionals who claim that their expertise entitles them to make decisions free from public interference.

Although their training and expertise clearly *do* give them special knowledge of how the schools should be run, educators have not been immune to this development. Distrust of school professionals is particularly acute among groups who feel that educational decision-making has become excessively centralized, impersonal, and unresponsive.

Another factor promoting changes has been the gradual rejection of the notion that schools should (or could) be somehow kept outside of "politics." Racial and ethnic minorities and groups with specific moral, religious, or political concerns have increasingly come to recognize the enormous political implications of such educational policy decisions as the selection of textbooks. If, in addition, significant cultural and social differences exist between citizens and school administrators, school policy may not be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of the citizens it is supposed to serve. The public's perception of such differences may add fuel to its demand for decision-making power.

Not surprisingly, these pressures have been reflected in a number of state and federal laws. Parental participation in policy-making is now mandated for schools that wish to qualify for certain types of federal and state aid. In addition, Dickson, writing in June 1978, counted fourteen states with a total of twenty-three laws requiring or recommending parental involvement. Olivero sums up the situation in California:

> Administrators in California schools really need very little rationale to convince them advisory councils are good and justified. The fact is they are the law of the land.

While these changes have been taking place in the public's role in decision-making, various groups within the schools have also been seeking more influence. Teachers, often relying on the collective bargaining process, have gained a role in making decisions about working conditions, staffing policies, curriculum development, selection of textbooks and subject material, and a whole range of other subjects. Other school groups, too, such as staff personnel and students, may seek voices in the policy-making process.

For the beleaguered school administrator, communicating with all these groups, balancing their conflicting claims

and interests, and still running the schools may seem like a task that would, as the old saw has it, tax the wisdom of Solomon. Fortunately, much of the king's proverbial wisdom was in his skill at communication—and listening—and in his ability to use simple common sense. These are skills school administrators, too, can exercise.

The following chapters offer some suggestions for administrators trying to cope with the new decision-making climate. We will consider, first of all, how it is possible to share decision-making power and, in the process, perhaps make better decisions. More generally, we will discuss some of the ways administrators can improve communication with groups inside the schools and with the public outside.

SHARING POWER

At least in theory, sharing decision-making power has a number of advantages. Schmuck and his colleagues list some of the more obvious benefits of using the resources of several people to solve a problem:

> Groups can usually produce more ideas, stimulate more creative thought among members, pool ideas to develop more realistic forecasts of the consequences of decisions, and generally produce bolder plans than can individuals acting alone.

This makes sense; few people have so much knowledge, wisdom, and experience that they cannot benefit from the help of others.

Participative Decision-Making

A Research Action Brief published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, *Participative Decision-Making,* discusses a number of empirical studies of the subject. Findings reported by Piper, for example, show that in problem-solving exercises leaders made better decisions with the help of advisory groups than they made when acting alone. Decision-makers who enlisted the help of others were thus in the enviable position of being able to benefit from good advice without running much risk of being misled by bad advice.

Participative decision-making (PDM) can also help an organization in a number of ways. It can promote better communication and a clearer understanding of the decisions that are made and the reasons for them. The benefits of a sense of personal involvement in decisions were emphasized by several of the administrators the author interviewed in preparing this digest. Jack Landis, superintendent of Santa Rosa City Schools, commented:

> When people are involved in making a decision, they *own* the solution and carry it out to a greater degree than if they're not involved. . . . In general, people are

happier with decisions they're involved in.

Student participation can also be beneficial. The decision-making process will be enriched by the special knowledge and perspectives that students can bring to it. In addition, sharing power can be a valuable learning experience for students, who can see how organizations work and, more importantly, gain first-hand knowledge of the democratic process in action.

There is some evidence that permitting others to participate in decision-making does not necessarily cause an administrator to lose power. Another Research Action Brief from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, *Managerial Control: A Middle Way,* surveys this question and concludes that the old notion that power is like a pie, with a bigger piece for some meaning a smaller piece for others, may not be accurate. No matter who makes policy, if decisions are not carried out effectively, no one is exercising much power. On the other hand, when policies are well understood, widely supported, and enthusiastically put into practice, an administrator who has given up some control over making decisions may still be exercising power more effectively.

The fear of losing power is particularly troubling to administrators. After all, no matter who makes the decisions, the responsibility for well-run schools ultimately falls on administrators. As Bob Mohr, principal of University High School, Irvine, California, puts it, "I make my living running the school, and that means that I have the final responsibility."

In the face of this concern, it is significant that none of the administrators we talked to reported that their overall power had been reduced by sharing decision-making. Instead, as Jodie King, principal of Vejas Elementary School, Walnut Valley, California, noted, "When we involve people, we generate more power for everyone. When we're all working together, it becomes a team effort to produce better quality education for our children, and that's what we all want."

Most of the problems attributed to PDM seem to be related to its inappropriate use. For example, some studies (summarized in *Participative Decision-Making* by the ERIC

Clearinghouse on Educational Management) show that teachers who are asked to participate in too many decisions may be as dissatisfied as those who do not participate enough. Obviously, people are more willing to contribute to decisions in matters that concern them. Other problems with PDM generally result from programs that are poorly defined, choose participants carelessly, or fail to provide participants with adequate training and support.

PDM is a flexible term that can cover a wide variety of decision-making arrangements. Three of the most important variables are how much decision-making power is being shared, the areas in which it is being shared, and the procedures the group uses to make its decisions.

PDM can mean an advisory council that makes recommendations to a school's principal or it can refer to a governing council that actually makes policies for the principal to administer. Between these two extremes are a number of intermediate arrangements. Decision-making groups may consider only a few specific matters or may deal with every aspect of school policy. Finally, decisions can be reached in a number of ways: two of the most common are majority vote and consensus (where everyone understands and accepts—without necessarily agreeing with—each decision).

Although some of these variables may be governed by existing laws, there are no final answers about which arrangements work best. Those who participate in consensus decision-making, for example, are generally more satisfied with the decision-making process itself and with the decisions arrived at than are participants in majority-vote groups. On the other hand, reaching decisions by consensus can be time-consuming and often proves virtually impossible in large groups. Majority vote decisions, in comparison, are relatively easy to make.

Embarking on a participative decision-making program involves several considerations. From examining the literature and talking to administrators, we have identified three things that are absolutely essential for any PDM program.

No system of shared decision-making will work well unless it has the support and approval of the chief administrator. Any power-sharing arrangement must therefore be compatible with the principal's leadership style and values.

Many principals will be reluctant, particularly at first, to yield the final say over certain types of questions.

Whatever arrangements are made, they should be clearly spelled out. This means that if a council is to be purely advisory or to have no voice in certain types of decisions, that fact should be made clear from the outset. All members of the PDM group should understand their powers, rights, and responsibilities clearly. This is essential since, as Carpenter notes, ". . . nothing is so sure to cause problems as ambiguity on any point."

A power-sharing group should have legitimate functions. Even if its job is only to offer advice, it should be advice that makes a genuine contribution to the shaping of policy. If a council is used as a figurehead to legitimize administrative decisions rather than to help make those decisions, its members will rapidly become demoralized and resentful.

The above points are so crucial to an effective PDM program that they are worth repeating:

- Any system must have the support and approval of the chief administrator.
- Arrangements should be clear, explicit, and, above all, free of ambiguity.
- A power-sharing body must have real, rather than token, functions.

Effective Group Procedures

One model of how a decision-making group should work might include the following steps: define a problem, analyze it, gather information about it, develop and weigh alternative solutions, and decide on a solution. Feedback procedures permit the evaluation of both the decision-making process and the effectiveness of the chosen solution.

Groups should have well-defined ground rules under which they operate. Johnson suggests members agree to the following commitments:

- Discussions will focus on evidence rather than opinions.
- All participants will be regarded as equals, sharing a common learning experience.

- The group will be task-oriented, and as much time as needed will be devoted to helping the group function more effectively.
- Outside resource help will be sought and used as it is needed.
- The strengths and abilities of each group member will be utilized.
- Creativity will be encouraged.
- Minority opinions will be respected.
- Participation will be shared; the group will not be controlled by one or two individuals.
- Communication channels will be kept open.

Group meetings should be regularly scheduled at convenient times and places, with planned agendas. Meetings should be well run and open to participation. The group's activities should be adequately publicized, with ongoing feedback and evaluation encouraged.

Members should also be provided with training and support. A good training program will explain the group decision-making process and help members master the problem-solving and decision-making skills they will need to identify and prioritize group needs, develop alternatives, find and use needed resources, and resolve conflicts. Some training in leadership and in working with people is also important.

The Human Element

Sayers notes that group members have three primary needs that must be met if they are to become confident and comfortable group participants. These are the needs for inclusion (belonging), control (power), and affection (friendship). Sayers states:

> Basic to a group's effectiveness is a level of trust, comfortable levels of power and influence and a feeling of being cared for and caring about others.

The need for inclusion is particularly important when the group is just starting; ways to help meet this need might be assigning a greeter at meetings, providing group members

with name tags, and organizing get-acquainted activities and social events.

To help meet the need for control, the group should encourage its members to study and discuss decision-making styles and norms. The group might practice role-switching, so that each member has a dominant role at least part of the time. The need for affection can be met by closer interpersonal relations within the group, for example, by encouraging verbal expressions of feelings and (particularly) of support.

Group involvement in decision-making should develop gradually. Early efforts might best be directed toward problems that, while important, are not difficult to solve. The group can gain confidence while it is gaining experience and then go on to tackle more difficult, and potentially more frustrating, problems.

The Principal's Role

By now it should be abundantly clear that the principal will play a key role in the success or failure of any power-sharing effort. Kaplan and Tune describe the principal's role as providing "a receptive climate, guidance, cooperation, and assistance in building a structure for participation that is mutually acceptable to them" and to those with whom they share power. This can be a delicate process. Johnson suggests that "the chief administrator must neither overwhelm and dominate the process nor withdraw from the planning process or fail to give it unqualified support." Because in practice this can prove to be difficult, Johnson further recommends:

> Since every administrator is different, your role should be discussed with an outsider and/or openly negotiated with the participants in the work, so that the most effective solution to this key question [the role of the principal] can be found.

A principal may function as the leader of the group (perhaps retaining a veto power over its decisions), may participate in discussions as a regular group member, or may offer the group advice without actually participating in decision-making.

Defining how much power is actually being shared is not always as easy as it sounds. A problem that often arises is that people do not always agree about who has how much power. Knoop and O'Reilly discovered one such situation in a survey of teachers and principals:

> Teachers perceived a higher degree of individual decision making on the part of the principal than principals perceived themselves. Principals, on the other hand, felt they involved teachers in decision making to a higher degree than actually perceived by teachers.

Such misunderstandings, which may arise because of faulty communication or differing expectations, can easily prove to be a source of conflicts.

The principal who wishes to lead a group must have the same skills, knowledge, and training as group members. In addition, he or she must be familiar with a number of different problem-solving strategies. Olivero suggests, "As a bare minimum, principals need to know the majority ballot process, the consensus process, the brainstorming process, the prioritizing process, and the force field process." Majority ballot is self-explanatory. Consensus requires that the group collaboratively discuss a variety of approaches to a problem until a solution is reached that is understood and accepted, though not necessarily agreed on, by every member of the group.

Brainstorming is a process of working to generate as many ideas—regardless of quality—as possible; negative comments about ideas are generally not allowed. In the prioritizing process, group members rank ideas according to their relative importance. Force field analysis involves identifying the forces preventing a solution and the steps needed to solve a problem.

No doubt there are many other skills principals need, and tactics they can use, to lead a group effectively. The most important skill, however, is the ability to communicate, and to this we now turn.

LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE

Communication is a human relations skill that is, in a sense, only half understood. Most people believe that if they speak or write clearly, or make gestures whose meanings can be clearly understood, they are communicating successfully. However, in a basic sense, communication is a two-way process, a sharing of information. This means that communication is listening as well as speaking, understanding as well as being understood.

How the Process Works

Pulley describes the communication process in general terms and identifies some of the points where problems can develop. Understanding these points of potential interference is essential to successful communication and to seeing why communications sometimes go awry. In the classical model of communication, there is a source, a message, a medium, a receiver, and a reaction. The following points are worth remembering about each:

- *Source.* How the source (in this case the principal) is seen is important; the principal should work to establish a positive image and an aura of credibility.
- *Message.* The message should be delivered in clear, grammatical language, free of jargon and loaded words; the principal should also be conscious of body language and other forms of nonverbal communication.
- *Medium.* A medium should be chosen that is effective and will reach the desired audience and get its attention. Face-to-face contact, which allows for direct feedback, can be ideal. It is sometimes a good idea to use several media simultaneously, so that the people missed by one will be reached by another.
- *Receiver.* People hear what they want to hear. The principal should try "to understand his receivers and to

construct and transmit his messages as clearly and nonalienatingly as possible," as Pulley states.

- *Reactions.* Reactions are difficult to predict. Even if the first four parts of the model are carefully considered and appropriately handled, there may still be unexpected reactions.

Schmuck and his colleagues identify a number of elements of effective communication. These include openness, communication when emotions are high, offering personal responses, and trust. The last of these, trust, is particularly important, since there is always an element of risk in communicating openly. The authors therefore list a number of freeing responses that can increase trust:

- listening attentively rather than silently
- paraphrasing, checking impressions of the other's meaning
- seeking information to understand the other better
- offering relevant information
- describing observable behaviors that influence you
- directly reporting your own feelings
- offering opinions, stating your value position

On the other hand, there are also binding responses that can reduce trust:

- changing the subject without explanation
- focusing on and criticizing things that are unchangeable
- trying to advise and persuade
- vigorously agreeing or strongly objecting
- approving someone for conforming to your own standards
- claiming to know what motivates others
- commanding or demanding to be commanded

Communication Skills

Jung and his associates point out that there are no real tricks to good communication; the only secret is having a sincere interest in the other person. A number of skills, however, are important for the effective communicator to

understand and master. The sections that follow on paraphrasing, behavior description, description of feelings, perception checking, and feedback are loosely adapted from the seminal work of Jung and his associates.

Paraphrasing

One of the oddities of modern life is that, if someone tells you his or her phone number, seven unambiguous pieces of information, you will probably repeat it to make sure you have it right, but if he or she makes a far more complex statement, you are likely to offer simple agreement or disagreement. In other words, as the possibilities for misunderstanding increase, our efforts to clarify messages generally decrease.

One way to remedy this situation is the use of paraphrasing to answer the question, "Am I understanding the other's idea as it was meant to be understood?" Paraphrasing is an effort to show other people what their words mean to you. Its goal is not only to clarify the message, but also to show your interest in the other person, an act that, in itself, can help improve communication.

What is most commonly meant by paraphrasing is simply putting a statement into different words. This does not always clarify things, as the following exchanges make clear:

One: "Jim should never have become a teacher."
"You mean teaching isn't the right job for him?"
"Exactly. Jim should never have become a teacher."

Two: "Jim should never have become a teacher."
"You mean he is too harsh with his students?"
"No. His tastes are too expensive for a teacher's salary."
"Oh. So he should have chosen a more lucrative profession."
"Exactly. Jim should never have become a teacher."

The communication in the first exchange is largely illusory since the "paraphrase" gives no real information about what the listener thinks the speaker meant. By contrast, in the second exchange even a "wrong" paraphrase that describes what the listener thought the speaker meant can lead to the exchange of more information and, thus, better communication.

The real purpose of paraphrasing is not to show what the other person actually meant (which would require mind-reading skills) but to show what it meant to *you*. This may mean restating the original statement in more specific terms, using an example to show what it meant to you, or restating it in more general terms.

It is possible, if somewhat unusual, to rely on paraphrasing excessively. When this happens, you avoid stating your own opinions, and the one-sidedness of the exchange may make the other person uncomfortable about giving information without receiving any in return. Extensive paraphrasing may be particularly important in situations where mistakes might be costly, or when strong feelings are present that might distort part of the message.

Behavior Description

When talking about what another person is doing, the communicator must recognize the difference between describing and evaluating. To be useful, behavior description, as Jung and his colleagues point out, should report

> specific, observable actions of others without placing a value on them as right or wrong, bad or good, and without making accusations or generalizations about the other's motives, attitudes or personality traits.

The communicator must tell people precisely what behavior he or she is responding to. For example, describing a specific set of actions ("You've disagreed with almost everything he's said") is very different from judging behavior ("You're being stubborn") or judging motivations ("You're trying to show him up"). Try to confine your remarks to things that are observable and stick to the facts without drawing conclusions about what they mean.

Practicing these rules can enhance communications and, at the same time, help reduce defensiveness and the problems that go with it. When someone feels threatened by a comment or an action, his or her defensiveness can become an end in itself and distract from the questions at hand. Types of supportive communication that can help reduce defensiveness include describing rather than evaluating, solving the problem rather than controlling the situation, being spontaneous rather than following a strategy, showing empathy

for others rather than maintaining a posture of neutrality, relating to others as an equal rather than a superior or a subordinate, and approaching differences of opinion with openness to new perspectives rather than with certainty.

Description of Feelings

What someone else perceives you as feeling often has more to do with his or her own feelings than with yours. In addition, if you are like most people, you work harder at describing your ideas clearly than at describing your feelings. As a result, it is not always easy to describe or understand feelings.

The way to avoid misperception of feelings is to describe them as directly and vividly as possible. Attach the description to yourself by beginning it with the word "I," "me," or "my." Some ways to do this include referring directly to the feeling ("I'm angry"), using similes ("I feel like a fish out of water"), describing what the feeling makes you want to do ("I'd like to leave this room"), or using some other figure of speech.

Be precise and unambiguous in describing your feelings. Saying "Shut up!" vehemently may express strong feelings, but it does not identify what these feelings are. Instead, say something more informative like "It hurts me to hear this!" "Hearing this makes me angry with you," or "Hearing this makes me angry with myself"; any of these three statements explains *why* you want the other person to stop talking.

In this, as in most aspects of communication, it is crucial to be open and honest. Feelings should be offered as pieces of information, not used in an effort to make the other person act differently. Also, be sure to make your nonverbal cues (facial expression, tone of voice, body language) agree with your words.

Perception Checking

Just as paraphrasing is an effort to find out what another person's words mean, so perception checking is an effort to understand the feelings behind the words. One way of checking perceptions is simply to describe your impressions of another person's feelings at a given time. This can help you to find out how well you are understanding the other

person at the same time it shows the other person your interest in him or her. Perceptions should be shared in a way that avoids expression of approval or disapproval.

Feedback

One way to clarify communication is to ask people to give their reactions to the messages your behavior sends off about you. Feedback is a means to improve shared understanding about behavior, feelings, and motivations. In giving feedback, it is useful to describe observed behaviors as well as the reactions they have caused. There are a number of guidelines to follow in giving feedback:

- The receiver should be ready to receive feedback.
- Comments should describe, rather than interpret, action.
- Feedback should focus on things that have happened recently.
- Feedback should focus on things that can be changed.
- Feedback should not try to force people to change.
- Feedback should be offered out of a sincere interest in and concern for the other person.

There are also some guidelines for receiving feedback:

- State what you want feedback about.
- Check what you have heard.
- Share your reactions to the feedback.

Exercises for Improvement

Schmuck and his associates suggest a number of exercises that can be useful in clarifying and developing the skills described above. Some of their suggestions are as follows:

- *Paraphrasing.* Divide into small groups. One person asks a question; the next paraphrases before answering.
- *Impression Checking.* Divide into pairs; one person conveys feelings through gestures, expressions, nonsense language, while the other person tries to interpret these cues. The two then talk about how correct the interpretations were.

- *Behavior Description.* Describe the behavior observed during any nonverbal exercise.
- *Describing Feelings.* Each person is given a written list of statements and told to identify which describe feelings and which do not (e.g., "I feel angry" does, but "I feel it's going to rain" does not).
- *Giving and Receiving Feedback.* Divide into trios. One person describes two helpful and two unhelpful behaviors of the second, who paraphrases the descriptions; the third person acts as an observer, making sure the other two are using communication skills correctly.

The same authors also describe exercises that can be used to clarify communications in meetings. These include the following:

- *Right to Listen.* Each speaker is required to paraphrase the terms of the discussion up to that point before speaking.
- *Time Tokens.* Each person pays a poker chip each time he or she talks. This clarifies who talks how often; if it provokes long speeches, it will also illustrate their drawbacks.
- *High Talker Tap-out.* Signal when each speaker uses up an allotted amount of time; at the end, discuss the process and the reasons some people talk more than others.
- *Take a Survey.* Ask each person for an opinion about a certain question. Everyone contributes, if only to admit having nothing to say.

The authors also recommend that groups use circular seating, which has two advantages: nonverbal behaviors are most apparent when everyone can be clearly seen; equal participation is encouraged when there is no podium or head of the table to suggest that one person is in charge. They also suggest that, in certain circumstances, videotaping or audio recording may be useful if someone is available with the skills and knowledge to judge what to record and when to play it back.

Gemmet stresses the importance of mastering the art of listening. One can become a good listener, according to

Gemmet, by developing "the *attitude* of wanting to listen and the *skills* to help you express that attitude." Some of the best ways to communicate an interest in listening are nonverbal signals such as "eye contact, attentiveness, use of hands, facial expressions, and tone of voice." There are three essentials to good listening:

- Don't interrupt.
- Don't judge.
- Reflect before answering.

Gemmet also offers additional tips for listening:

- Face the speaker and be close enough to hear.
- Watch nonverbal behavior.
- Be aware of biases and values that may distort what you hear.
- Look for the basic assumptions underlying remarks.

At the same time, it is also important to keep in mind a number of things to *avoid* doing:

- thinking of other things while listening
- rehearsing an answer while the other person is still talking
- interrupting to correct a mistake or make a point
- tuning out and starting a silent combat when you hear certain "red-flag" words
- feeling compelled to have the last word

The Principal's Responsibility

Because of the principal's sizable influence on communication in the school, suggestions abound on how the principal can communicate most effectively. Valentine and his associates found that certain types of principal behavior significantly affected school climate. Their main finding was that, "Generally speaking, the more direct the principal, the more positive the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents." In addition, they found that "the use of humor . . . indicated a significantly relaxed, positive human relations atmosphere."

An important element in good communications is a willingness to give strokes, to express appreciation for a job well

done. Jodie King indicated that the best way to do this is to

> offer positive reinforcement at all levels, focusing on the positive, letting people know what they are doing well —and praising them—and *then*, if necessary, suggesting things they need to do to improve.

One way King does this is by always leaving a note after she observes a class. She mentions only positive things in the note; if she has any criticisms to make, she asks the teacher to speak to her, so she can make them face-to-face.

Ingari suggests a number of things a principal can do to improve his or her relations with the school community. The most important thing is to be open and accessible, so that people will feel you are available and welcome personal contact with them. Spend time with various members of the faculty—over lunch, during coffee, in the faculty lounge, or at informal teacher "hang-outs." The personal touch—asking people about their families or calling them by their first names—can be effective. Use a suggestion box and maintain an "open door" policy that encourages faculty members to "drop in" to your office.

Many times, communication can be improved merely by finding out whom other people listen to. Communicating successfully with these "key communicators" can have a ripple effect, since they will tell many others what they hear from you.

All these suggestions are really only samples of what principals can do to improve communication. Learning the right skills and procedures are, of course, important, but what is essential is to develop an attitude of caring about people and taking a genuine interest in their ideas, opinions, and beliefs.

REACHING THE PUBLIC

Any time a school's staff or students communicate with the public relations progam is operating. Such a program may be carefully planned and executed or it may develop accidentally and at random. When a parent meets with a school official, when a child describes what went on in school during the day, or when a caller is put on hold and inadvertently forgotten by an overworked receptionist, the school is communicating something, not always something good, to the public.

The question to ask about school public relations efforts is not, then, *whether* to develop a program, but *how* to develop a good one. Perhaps the ideal program is described in the National School Public Relations Association's definition of school public relations (quoted by Armistead):

> a planned and systematic two-way process of communication between an education organization and its internal and external publics . . . to stimulate a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.

School communications with the public can be divided into three classes: public and formal, private and formal, and private and informal. The first two types, which cover the school's "official" business, from report cards to press releases, are generally recognized as public relations concerns. The often-neglected third type, however, is by far the most common, the hardest to plan, and probably the most important.

Informal communication takes place whenever anyone associated with a school gives the public any kind of message about that school. Such a message is most often conveyed by a student, a volunteer, or an employee of any type; many people see *all* school employees—custodians, secretaries, teachers, and administrators—as "insiders" with special access to information. The message they convey may be verbal (a rumor or a comment about policy) or nonverbal (litter on a school neighbor's lawn or a group of students

helping a motorist change a flat tire). Obviously, many of these communications exchanges are beyond a principal's control, which points up the fact that the best public relations approach is to have a well-run school, with a happy, well-informed staff and student body.

Public Relations Strategies

The key to effective public relations is good planning; as Armistead notes, "constructive public relations is planned, while destructive public relations just happens." It is crucial to know whom you want to reach, what they know, and how you can get them information about what they don't know. In general, the quality of the public's knowledge of the schools is low, with most information coming from people connected with the schools. A successful public relations effort will be designed around developing appropriate strategies to meet the specific needs of a school's situation.

Banach and Barkelew suggest that, in planning public relations, brainstorming is a useful technique for identifying a school's key publics and finding ways to reach them. A good brainstorming session should identify forty or fifty different groups (from senior citizens and business organizations to religious groups) and perhaps a hundred public relations ideas (from writing without jargon to sending the school band to a convalescent home). From these lists, it should be easy to identify the groups it is most important to reach and decide how to reach them.

Personal Contact

Probably the group most concerned about what goes on in the schools is parents. They are interested in such questions as how their children are doing, what is being taught and how, and what special services the school can offer. This information should be provided as clearly as possible. Since praise is far more pleasant to hear than criticism, schools should personally contact parents about the good things their children are doing, instead of reserving personal contact for discussing discipline problems or academic difficulties.

Much of what parents learn about schools comes, not surprisingly, from their children. One simple way to improve the quality of information children give their parents is to have students, particularly those in the lower grades, keep journals, making entries at the end of each day. Reviewing the day's activities in this way may help the child give clearer, more interesting answers to the familiar parental question, "What did you do in school today?"

When a parent—or anyone else—contacts the school, it is important to present a positive image. The main contact most people have with a school is over the phone. This makes it crucial that people who answer school phones understand the importance of being as friendly, courteous, and helpful as possible.

Schools should also try to be receptive to irate parents. Jodie King suggests that parents with complaints should know:

- that there will be a parking place for them when they arrive at the school
- that they will be greeted by the staff in a friendly manner
- that the principal will be available to speak to them within a reasonable time
- that some action (though not necessarily what they want) will be taken in response to their complaints

Key Communicators

A group schools should try hard to reach is opinion leaders. These are persons who are respected and influential in their communities because of their positions and reputations. Another type of "key communicator" is the barber or beautician who talks to many people in a community. School principals would do well to cultivate good relations with both types of influentials. This can be done informally, by periodic phone calls to discuss school affairs, by invitations to lunch at school, or by establishing a formal group of key communicators and meeting with it regularly.

Whatever approach is used, administrators should recognize that key communicators who are sympathetic to the

school—or at least well informed about it—can play a key role in informing the public about the school. The public may not always agree with what is taking place, but at least it will not be unaware of it. Key communicators can be particularly effective in clarifying misconceptions about policies and in dispelling rumors. Remember that communications efforts should be a two-way process; key communicators can tell the schools about what the public is thinking while they are telling the public about what is going on in the schools.

Advisory Councils

One formal means of obtaining a two-way flow of information is the citizens advisory committee. For many school districts, advisory councils are not an option but a necessity, as an increasing number of governmental programs require some form of community participation in school decision-making. Administrators might easily resent the forced intrusion of these citizen committees into the school's decision process. Beyond the extra work and potential frustration an advisory council brings, however, are some clear benefits for the administrator who wants to generate public support for his or her school.

As Hofstrand and Phipps point out, every community evaluates its schools; the advantage of having a citizens advisory council is that it can channel the public's evaluation toward constructive ends. It does so by facilitating the exchange of accurate information. Public criticism arising from vague and incomplete understanding of the schools will be offset when administrators are able to give clear facts about the school's strengths and weaknesses to council members, who in turn pass on this information to the community. The quality of decisions made by the school's administration also ought to benefit from the two-way flow of information, because those decisions are made with a more accurate knowledge of the community's needs and expectations for its schools.

Perhaps the most important determinant of the success of an advisory council as a communications medium is its composition. There are several ways of selecting advisory

council members. They may be appointed (either by the school's administration or by some other group), they may be elected, or they may be recruited as volunteers. Whatever selection process is used should yield a council that is made up primarily of parents but that represents a broad cross-section of the community. Diversity is essential. Stanton and his colleagues report that most councils suffer from a shortage of "minority, low-income, student, non-parent, and except in leadership positions, male representation."

To fill these needs, active recruitment of members of these groups may be necessary. Title I mandates participation by lower-income persons and members of racial minorities, two groups that have traditionally been excluded from decision-making. Involving such persons is not always easy to bring about, since many have attitudes that make them reluctant to participate in school affairs. Often they are less favorable toward the schools, less willing to wait patiently for changes, and less confident of their communications skills than the relatively affluent, well-educated persons who generally volunteer for school-related groups.

An advisory council should also include respected and influential community members. It is important to enlist the aid of individuals with special expertise in areas the council will be considering. Qualities to look for in all participants include interest, time, and an ability to get along with people.

The best way to attract and keep council members is to appeal to their self-interest, particularly by demonstrating that their actions can make a difference. Often, simply asking people to serve on a council or run for a position will be effective in convincing them that their services are valued. Price summarizes what is needed: "For citizen participation to be sustained, it must be a satisfying, rewarding, and productive experience."

The operation of an advisory council will surely test the leadership skills of the principal. Carpenter states that the principal's most important function is to make sure the advisory group is aware of its limits and responsibilities and the possibilities open before it. The principles and skills of power sharing and communication, described in the preceding chapters as applying to the principal's leadership of the

school's faculty and students, apply as well to the process of governing a citizens advisory council. A helpful resource for those who conduct the council's meetings is the ACSA/ERIC School Management Digest *Making Meetings More Effective.*

The Media

Although personal relationships are the long-range key to effective communication with the public, the best way to reach a large number of people in a short time is through the media. The administrator should not merely wait for the media to come to the schools, which they will do in crisis-type situations, but should make good media relations an ongoing priority. When working with the media in any situation, be honest, open, and cooperative. Regularly provide reporters and newscasters with material; along with public service announcements and press releases, offer them story suggestions and other ideas that emphasize positive developments in the school. Becoming personally acquainted with reporters and editors is also a good idea.

The school administrator must be willing to take whatever time is needed to explain a program or an idea to media representatives, since they will eventually be communicating it to the public. At times, it may be necessary to be frank about the potential impact of an event or program, or to admit that you do not know the answer to a question. Try to avoid an adversary relationship with the press; reporters are, for the most part, hardworking and conscientious information gatherers, who make mistakes accidentally, not out of malice or a thirst for sensationalism. When corrections must be made, don't take things personally, and stick to the facts. Finally, interviews are unique opportunities to get your message to the public, not potential traps.

School-based media are another way of reaching various groups. These media provide an opportunity to say exactly what you want in a form under your control. In developing a publication, you need to keep its purpose in mind, understand the audience it is intended to reach, and make sure the potential rewards justify the cost. All written material, from letters to publications, should strive for clarity in writing, in

format and design, and in graphics. Printed material should be distributed by mail; sending it home with students may be cheaper, but even the U.S. Postal Service is far more reliable about delivering printed material than are most school children.

Surveys

One way of finding out what the public is thinking about, or what it wants from the schools, is to take an opinion survey. Before beginning a survey, you should be aware of its cost and carefully determine what you want to find out and why. It may be possible to get the necessary information without taking a survey by informally polling key communicators for example.

Once a survey has been decided on, the next step is to clearly define whom to survey, what type of survey to use, and what types of questions to ask. It is important to realize in advance how reliable the survey will be and how quickly its results will become available. The best, most reliable, and most cost-effective survey is undoubtedly an ongoing two-way program of communication with the public that constantly keeps both the schools and the public informed about each other.

A Time-Saving Suggestion

An effective public relations program is essential to a school, but it takes time, one commodity no principal has enough of. One solution to this problem is to assess the situation, decide on a suitable public relations approach, and devote five minutes a day to implementing it. If the first day's task takes more than five minutes, the time can be credited to future days. As a result, there will be a systematic and ongoing effort to improve public relations that does not make unreasonable demands on the principal's time. Several writers suggest that it is surprising how much can be accomplished with even this modest investment of time.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, communicating while sharing power can be a complex, difficult, and occasionally frustrating business. The change in style from the paternalism of the fifties and sixties to the participation of today is not always an easy one for administrators to make, particularly since there are no secret formulas for communicating effectively in the new environment. In fact, good communication varies according to the needs of a situation; what works under one set of circumstances may be useless or even harmful under another.

Nevertheless, a few general guidelines have emerged from our discussion. The dominant theme is the need for clarity, which is at the heart of good communication, whether spoken or written. Members of power-sharing groups need to know precisely what they are and are not expected to do. Parents, media representatives, and other citizens need to be kept informed, in the clearest possible terms, about what is happening in the schools.

Equally important, communication is a two-way process that involves listening as well as talking. There may be times when the best way to communicate—or to lead—is simply to listen to what others have to say, allowing them to contribute to the decision-making process.

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